

The Midwife and the Lindworm



by A. A. Freeman

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through fandoms long past: I love you all, but please stop staying up super
late reading my work. Go to bed. I'll be here in the morning.

Draped in the finest silks, The Queen sat upon her throne looking for all the world like a marble statue given life. Her skin showed no hint of the sun, nor did her hands carry the mark of a single day of work. Jewels had been sewn into her dress, and feathers of tropical birds braided through her hair. She held herself with the knowledge that she was as fine as the works of art that hung upon the throne room walls. The Queen was beautiful, ethereal, and frankly made The Midwife feel like a downright idiot for showing up wearing her second-best shawl. Royalty did that to a person, no matter how old or wise one might be.

“Midwife,” The Queen said, her voice filling the grand hall. “I have been told you were the one who attended to the birth of my child. Is this true?”

The Midwife gave a slight bow. “I can’t say for sure, Your Majesty. How old is your child?”

“He shall be of age this spring.”

“That’s almost a good twenty years ago now, isn’t it? I’ve brought a lot of people into this world, and most of the births run together, if I do say so myself. You walk in, slap the baby, and advise the parents not to name it after a type of sheep. Or a wandering bard. Gods above, that’s the worst. Do you know how many Gilberts have been named after that one prat who won’t stop singing about his tragic love affair with a magician’s daughter? I swear, a few notes of a song, and suddenly their grandfather’s middle name isn’t good enough anymore!”

The Queen didn’t seem to mind the aside and simply waited for The Midwife to stop before she spoke again. “I would be the *Queen* you attended on,” she said with a curt tone in her voice.

“Still doesn’t narrow it down, Your Majesty. I get called to assist with everything from foxes to the Gods themselves. I am The Midwife, and my hands open the doors to this world. You will have to be a bit more precise. Was there anything unusual about the birth?”

“I gave birth to twins.”

“Not ringing any bells.”

“One of the twins was a serpent.”

The Midwife snapped her calloused fingers. “Ah! I thought you looked familiar. Yes, yes, now I remember. First one that came out was a nice healthy boy with rosy cheeks and a good pair of lungs. Perfect for a

future king. I do believe I suggested the name Arvid. Old-fashioned, but rather good for a king. Did you go with that one?"

"Yes, but—"

"Good, good. King Arvid. Short but strong. What about the serpent? I think I saw her as a good Kjersti. Nice dependable name, that."

"No, we—"

"Why not? Kjersti's a perfectly fine name. You could trust your coin purse to a Princess Kjersti, no doubt about it."

"We did not name the serpent!" The Queen stood, causing the silk of her gown to fall in less pleasing ways. "That horrid creature escaped out the window as soon as it slithered from the womb!"

The Midwife wrinkled her nose as she turned over the worn-out memory in her head. "No, she didn't. I wrapped her up in a nice cotton blanket and handed her to one of those ladies-in-waiting hanging about. No defenestration during that birth at all."

"That is what I have told my husband, and that is the truth of that day! And now the blasted thing has invaded this castle because it wants a bride!" She stared The Midwife down, only to find her well-practiced gaze fizzling before it could reach the older woman.

"First off," The Midwife said, her voice as steady as the rocks below her feet. "You really should have lead this conversation with the fact that she's currently here. Secondly, I do recall recommending you name the child, baptize her in the name of whatever god you follow, and raise her to be the sort of serpent that doesn't go around killing people. Now, why didn't you listen to my advice?"

The Queen's lower lip wavered. "Because the child was not mine. I was tricked by an evil fae into carrying that beast alongside my son."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed." The Queen sat back down on the throne. "My husband and I tried for years to have a child. In desperation I went to a faerie circle and begged for their help. The King of the Fae appeared in his glory and told me to put a teacup with two handles upside down in the royal garden. When I lifted the cup up in the morning there would be two roses underneath, one red and one white. If I ate the red I would have a boy, and if I ate the white I would have a girl. But I should not eat both of them.

"I did as he said and lo, there were two roses. But after I ate one, I foolishly ate the other. Don't you see? The King of the Fae knew I would

eat both. I was tricked! Tricked into birthing that wicked creature!”

“You got pregnant after eating two roses.”

“Magical roses, yes.”

The Midwife nodded to herself in thought. “I see. And did your husband actually believe that?”

“That is what I told him. Therefore that is the truth.”

“Uh huh. Does he actually know where babies come from? Is that why you were having so much trouble?”

“Midwife!” The Queen’s pale cheeks turned red. “I did not call upon you to slander my name nor the future lineage of this kingdom! You are here because you were at the birth of that monster, and perhaps your hands may also be its doorway out of this world.

“I have heard stories of your exploits. They say you can defeat monsters the size of this very castle with nothing more than a few spoken words. Bards sing that the ageless dragon who ravaged the northern lands was defeated by you. Is this true?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” The Midwife sighed. “But I won’t deny it.”

“Good. You will need to call upon those skills, for The Lindworm has returned to the place of its birth.”

“Lindworm? Really? *Really?*”

“That is the name it calls itself by.”

“Should have went with Kjersti.”

“The name is not the issue. The issue is that this thing, this monster showed up on the eve of my son’s birthday calling itself a prince and saying it’s the rightful heir to the throne. Not only that, but the beast also demands a princess to marry or else it will destroy us all! Do you see the issue we have, Midwife? There are not that many kingdoms in this world willing to play matchmaker for a serpent. And those who were willing to send their daughters obviously sent their . . . lesser ones. Certainly none are good enough for The Lindworm.”

“And what gives you that idea?”

“It eats them.”

The Midwife’s fingers twisted around the edge of her shawl. The frayed wool edges scratched at her skin, grounding her. “You are sending young women off to their deaths?”

The Queen let out a huff of air. “Please. If their lives were worth anything then they wouldn’t have been sent here to marry a serpent. Five girls have been devoured so far, and at this rate there won’t be anyone left for my wonderful son to marry. Or worse, that awful serpent will actually marry one of these girls. In my eyes a fate worse than death.”

“So you called upon me?” The Midwife let go of her shawl to press a hand against her chest. “Are there no knights in your kingdom? No mercenaries? Adventurers? A farmer with a sharp stick?”

“Of course! Do not take me as a fool. A dozen knights have faced The Lindworm and each ran with their tail between their legs. We have offered countless riches for any who can slay that behemoth but none have been successful. But perhaps you, you who can defeat evil with only a few words, can vanquish The Lindworm with no further blood being spilled.”

Silence settled around the two women. The Midwife lifted her eyes up to the heavens as if the castle’s ceiling had advice to offer. She silently counted to ten in her head before returning her gaze to the untouchable Queen.

“Aye, I can do it. I will take down the serpent, rightful prince or not. I’ll even think of a better fitting name to bury him under. But I will need your most loyal maid, ten dresses of yours you can part with, a bucket of lye, a bucket of milk, and two branches from the old mulberry tree I saw in the gardens. Oh, and the location of this foul—”

Before The Midwife could finish her words a great howl echoed through the castle. The old walls shook at the sound, causing dust to drift from the ceiling onto the plush carpet below. It settled on The Midwife’s shoulders with the gentle touch of freshly fallen snow. Silence returned only when the last of the vibrations faded back into the stone. The Queen’s eyes remained on The Midwife the entire time, not even flinching when one of the larger tapestries fell down with a soft *froomph*.

The Midwife brushed a crumb of fallen dust off of her shawl and gave The Queen a knowing look. “Never would have happened if you gave him a name.”

* * *

The wing of the castle The Midwife was led to certainly looked like a monster lived there. Shattered remains of statues, slashed paintings, and rugs torn to pieces were scattered about. She traced the deep scratches across the stone walls with her hand as they walked, noting how the grooves were deep enough for her fingers to sink into them. The Maid leading her would pause occasionally to glance back at The Midwife, but did not speak until they turned into a well-lit hallway that ended in a large wooden door.

“Your plan will not work,” The Maid said, as plainly as one would state the weather. The Midwife rather liked The Maid—a stout young woman with calloused hands and sharp eyes that didn’t even flinch when ordered to follow her into certain death. Loyal indeed.

“Such sharp words.” The Midwife adjusted her grip on the bucket of milk and the mulberry branch wedged under her arm. She regretted not asking for two loyal maids. “You must take care not to cut yourself on them.”

The Maid laughed hard enough for her plump body to jiggle as she looked back at The Midwife. She carried the bucket of lye and the other branch as if it were nothing. Such was the strength of youth. “I see, I see. You’re an absolute loon. Well! If you’re so eager to die within the jaws of the serpent, may I make a request?”

The Midwife smiled back, her own grin softer around the edges. “You may, seeing that you’ll be the serpent’s dessert.”

“That shawl is made of Jacob’s wool, correct?”

“Good eye.” The Midwife rubbed her thumb against the greying fabric. “My daughter gave it to me. She said if I was going to run off on another adventure, I better keep myself warm this time.”

“A heartfelt gift, but also practical. If it isn’t too much, could you please put it aside before we go in? My parents are sheep farmers who live on the edge of the kingdom, so I know quality when I see it. And it would be such a shame for a lovely shawl to be destroyed alongside the both of us. Let whoever cleans up have it instead.”

“An odd request, but not the worst one I’ve heard. And my daughter will appreciate me not getting any blood on my brand-new shawl.” The Midwife did as The Maid asked, removing her shawl and folding it before placing it on one of the larger piles of rubble. The reprieve from carrying

the heavy bucket of milk was worth the loss of her second-best shawl. “Has it occurred to you that we both may live through this?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” The Maid sighed. “At least in death, I won’t have to wait on The Queen. I don’t suppose you could figure out a way for her to be eaten instead?”

“Meat that tough would require hours of boiling, and I’m sure the kitchen staff would prefer to sleep. Come now. If we’re to be a meal, then we better be off before the serpent complains about the wait,” The Midwife said, finding joy in The Maid’s bitter laugh as they came upon the door.

The door was a massive thing of ancient wood and inlaid with more gold than any door had any right to bear. Nothing barred the door from the outside, but The Midwife supposed if the serpent wanted to leave, mere stone or wood wouldn’t be able to stop it. She placed her bucket of milk down and took the mulberry branch in hand. The Maid mirrored her movement with the lye and her own branch.

“You may leave if you wish,” The Midwife said. “Tell The Queen you escaped while I was getting eaten. You can even grab my shawl on your way.”

The Maid scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You asked for the most loyal maid, and you got her. Now hurry up. The Gods will be angry if we’re late to meet them.”

“And let the Gods judge me for giving you an out.”

With the mulberry branch clenched tight in her hand, The Midwife lightly touched the door. It gave way, revealing the room within. Beyond the dark shadows one could barely make out a royal bedroom torn asunder, glass shards and chunks of wood spread across the floor, curtains shredded, and the bedding nothing more than a pile of scraps. If there was one blessing it was that the room lacked any remains from previous meals.

“*My bride?*” The voice was taunt, thin, like a violin string brought to its breaking point. The sound came from everywhere at once. Not exactly ideal for either of the two women, given the circumstances.

The Midwife scanned the room, but nothing besides wreckage and shadows laid before her. “Aye, I got your bride right next to me—”

“What—?” The Maid hissed, only to be cut off.

“—so how about you show yourself, and I can introduce the two of you, all proper-like?”

Silence. Nothing good ever came of silence. Yet the sound of a single piece of rubble falling off the remains of the bed onto the stone floor was far worse. Another piece tumbled off, and another, and another as a monstrous shape rose from the trash heap.

The Midwife noted that ‘serpent’ had been the wrong word to use when describing The Lindworm. No, *worm* was far more accurate. A fat earthworm the size of a tree that moved like a dying man’s still-undulating intestines. A hole—his mouth—expanded as The Lindworm raised his front half up, revealing rows upon rows of fractured human-like teeth.

“*My bride!*” The Lindworm swung what The Midwife decided to call his head around to face The Maid. His words flowed through the air itself instead of from the tooth-filled maw. “*My bride, my sweet, my delicious—That is not a princess.*”

“Course she is,” The Midwife said as she stepped between The Lindworm and The Maid. “Can’t you see?”

“*Can’t I—*” The Lindworm wiggled his head around. His voice took an agitated tone. “*Do you see any eyes?! Are eye-having worms common where you’re from? Worm eyes? Eye worms? Do worms travel to worm doctors for worm eyeglasses? Is that a thing that happens in your village, peasant?*”

“I’m not a peasant. I am The Midwife, and my hands open the doors to this world. So you better watch your tone, boy.”

“*I am The Lindworm! Prince of these lands! And I do not have worm eyes!*”

The Maid, who had been frozen during the brief meeting, finally snapped out of it. “Oh Gods above, I just imagined eye worms. Like, worms in your eyes.”

“That happens,” The Midwife said, not taking her own eyes off The Lindworm. “Parasite worms. Usually they just stick with diggin’ into cows, but sometimes they get into humans. Why, just a few weeks back, I helped treat a farmer with an eyeball the size of—”

“*Stop! Stop right there. We will not discuss worms or eyes or any combination of the two.*” The Lindworm’s mouth flexed open as a ripple ran through his body. “*Do not distract me from the fact that this woman is clearly not a princess.*”

“Never said I got you a princess, I just said I got you a bride.” The Midwife took a second to wave her mulberry branch in front of The Lindworm’s face, or at least where a proper face should be. *Nothing. Good.*

“Seems to me that princesses might not be your type, considering you keep eating them.”

“Yes, yes I have!” The Lindworm’s voice split the air like a knife. *“I have devoured all princesses set before me, for none where good enough to be my bride. Tell me, Midwife, why I should risk ruining my supper with the sub-par flesh of a commoner? And where are you going?”*

The Midwife stepped into the room and walked up to the body of The Lindworm. Indeed, he appeared almost exactly like a common earthworm. Perhaps one fit for a giant’s garden, but a worm nevertheless. “I thought you couldn’t see?” She said as she looked over The Lindworm’s body.

“Well, no, but I can sense light and darkness. There were two blobs of dark in front of the hallway light, and now there’s only one that smells of work. Cook?”

“Maid.”

“No matter. You are not worthy to be devoured. And seriously, Midwife, what are you doing back there?”

The Midwife ducked just in time to avoid The Lindworm’s head as he swung around to face her. She gave The Maid a short wave, and the other woman followed her into the room, mulberry branch at the ready. “Don’t mind me at all, sir, just admiring and trembling in fear over the state of this room. I must say, I am impressed. Do the princesses put up a fight?”

The Lindworm twisted around, encircling The Midwife, creating a wall of flesh between her and The Maid. Yet The Midwife did not tremble, nor did she take her eyes off the worm’s great body. They were glued to a thick piece of skin wrapped around The Lindworm’s neck like a fleshy cowl. She focused on that and not the sound of teeth scraping against each other right above her head.

“Not always, not always. Most of them are too afraid to even move. Some, I swallow whole, so I can feel them struggle all the way down. Others, I tear limb from limb. The last one, I took my time feeding on, starting from the bottom up, just so I could hear her screams mix with the sound of her bones being crushed between my jaws!”

“Then where’s the mess?”

“Pardon?”

“Yeah,” The Maid said as she stepped around the rubble, the light from the hallway spilling into the room behind her. “Shouldn’t there be

blood and guts everywhere? Stains at least. It'd smell to high heaven, too. Like a butcher shop, but without all the charm."

"Do you not see the wreckage? The destruction I have wrought?"

The Midwife glanced up at the worm's face, even if there was nothing to see. "I don't see anything that couldn't also be done with an axe and a sharp knife. Oh mighty worm, are you actually eating these girls?"

"Of course I am! I am The Lindworm! Rightful prince of this kingdom! And I shall tear apart every princess set before me before I find the one worthy to be my bride. Now run back to The Queen and tell her to—"

Before The Lindworm could spit out the rest of his demand, The Midwife drew back her arm and slapped the mulberry branch as hard as she could against the thick piece of skin around the worm's neck. The Lindworm howled and drew back, only for The Maid to smack him with her own branch. Without a word, the two women attacked The Lindworm in tandem, neither slowing as the beast tried to wiggle away.

"That! Ow! Stop! Stop that! That! OW! Really! Hurts! Stop! STOP! OWOWOW! I SAID STOP!"

"Tell me where the girls are!" The Midwife shouted, lashing The Lindworm's skin.

"I ate them!" The Lindworm's voice cracked, the sharp edge falling away to a far more soft, yet also far more panicked voice. *"I ate them and they're gone and dead and stop hitting me please! Don't you know how much that HURTS?"*

"Well, as I understand it, that flesh collar of yours is where worms keep their genitals. At least, that's what the farmer said while I was treating his eye. Bastard wouldn't shut up about worms." The Midwife pressed her foot into The Lindworm's soft flesh and felt it give under the pressure.

"This isn't working. Maid, go get the lye. We'll have to burn the flesh off."

"DO NOT GET THE LYE! I GIVE UP! Just, just give me a moment!"

The Lindworm's whole body shuddered once, twice, three times, before collapsing on the bedroom floor. The flesh under The Midwife's foot gave way and flattened, as if all of the air had escaped. The only shape which remained within was a large lump about halfway through. The Midwife watched as the lump began to move, easing its way to the mouth of the worm. She let it, and even reached over to lower The Maid's mulberry branch for her.

Clear slime dripped out of the still worm's mouth, followed by the shattered remains of his teeth. The fractured incisors gave way to cracked canines, and finally, to whole, untouched molars the size of a hen's egg right before a human hand popped out. Much to The Midwife's relief, the hand was attached to an arm, which was followed by a second arm, and then by nothing else.

"Mmmph!" said the lump within the seemingly-dead Lindworm, waving its arms frantically as it did.

The Midwife sighed, rolled up her sleeves, and walked over to the front of the worm's body. She could just barely see a tuft of black hair between the two arms now frantically clawing at the floor. Doing her best to ignore the way her spine cracked when she leaned down, The Midwife grabbed onto the edge of the worm's mouth and pulled it up just enough for the human's head and shoulders.

"Midwife?" The Maid asked. "Why is there handsome man in The Lindworm?"

The man laughed between gasps of air. "Covered in slime, wrapped in decaying flesh, my chest unbound and she still calls me a handsome man! I would invite you out for a stroll, Miss Maid, but I can't feel my legs." The man opened his eyes, which shone with an iridescent light in the darkness of the room. His warm smile for The Maid all but vanished the second he looked at The Midwife. "Oh hell, it's you."

The Midwife sat down on his chest, not letting him wiggle out of the worm just yet. "Don't act so shocked. I told you who I was."

"You didn't say you were *The* Midwife! Killer of the endless dragon! She who divided the courts! Your hands closed the door to this world! I swear, I didn't know!"

"Almost certain I said the hand part." The Midwife gave the person's neck a sharp poke. "Now tell me who you are, who sent you, and what happened to the girls."

"Never! You may be The Midwife, but I will never betray my king and my court!"

"So be it." The Midwife reached down the front of her shirt and pulled out a metal pendent attached to a simple leather cord. The pendent itself was a half-circle carved to resemble a closed eye. She held it over the man's face. "Does this loosen your tongue?"

He scoffed. "So you have the symbol of The King! What of it? You think I should talk just because you wear it? You could have easily stolen it off a fellow fae."

"No, you should talk because this is made out of iron and I'm gonna press it against your eyeball till it burns straight through. Maid, hold his head still. This is going to take a while and I don't want him to wiggle away."

"Wait! Wait! No, no please stop...STOP! I'll tell you everything! I swear!"

"I am The Lindworm, knight of the Seelie Court, sent here by The King of the Fae on a mission. It was his idea, ma'am. Have me return to the land of my birth, demand a bride, and then whenever they sent in a girl I would thrash about a bit and then help her escape out the window. Give her some gold, directions to the nearest port, that sort of thing."

"But why?" The Maid asked, stepping over the remains of the worm's body with care.

"Any family that's willing to give their daughters up as a sacrifice is not worthy to have one," The Midwife replied. "And The King of the Fae asks for nothing in return?"

"Only to promise that they never step foot in their homelands again, and to live happily for the rest of their days."

"He would say that." The Midwife rubbed her eyes. "Go back to your king and tell him the jig is up. And get out of here before The Queen sends in a knight that's not so easily scared of earthworms. I'll tell her I tricked you into eating your own tail until you turned inside-out or something. Maid, if you could please help clean up Kjell and fetch some clothes for 'em so he doesn't have to run stark naked to the closest fairy circle, that would be great."

The Maid only got halfway through her curtsy before asking, "Wait, who?"

"Kjell. The Lindworm. That's his name now. I originally suggested Kjersti, but that was before I knew you were a prince and not a princess. So Kjell it is and Kjell you are. Better late than never, right?"

"Huh," said Kjell. "Never had a name before. Does it hurt, having one?"

The Midwife stood, shaking a few chunks of teeth from her dress as she walked to the open doorway. She should have kept her shawl on. The

air was too cold to go without. She looked back at Kjell, whose eyes still shone with an unworldly fae light. “Only if you give it to the wrong person, Kjell. Only if you give it to the wrong person.”

* * *

Despite her best efforts, The Midwife could not escape the castle proper before the celebration began. Once word of The Lindworm's death reached The Queen's ears, The Midwife was declared a hero, their savior, and called by a whole bunch of other titles that meant nothing to her. To make things worse, her requests to go home were muffled by cries of joy that spread throughout the kingdom and the lands beyond.

She might have been doomed to attend a party or worse, give a speech, if not for the quick thinking of The Maid. All it took was an excuse about a royal horse having trouble giving birth to spirit The Midwife away to the edge of the castle grounds. Never in her life had The Midwife been so thankful to see a horse-drawn cart. She could have kissed the horse or The Maid, but neither choice seemed like a wise one.

"I packed a few days' worth of water and rations for you. Should be enough to get you to the kingdom's border," The Maid whispered, despite no one else being around. "Also those dresses The Queen gave you. Why did you want them anyway?"

The Midwife hoisted herself up onto the cart seat with little effort. "A few girls in my village are getting married in the spring. I figured there's probably at least nine of them that could use something nice to wear for the occasion."

"Ten," The Maid corrected. "You asked for ten dresses."

"Funny thing about that. I couldn't think of a single girl I knew that would fit the tenth one. Simply too big for any of them. 'Cept my own daughter, but last I checked, she's not getting hitched anytime soon. And you know, you're just about her same size around, if not the same height."

The Maid narrowed her eyes. "And what makes you think I'm in the market for a wedding dress?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. It's always a good idea to have a nice dress on hand. You never know who's going to get married or buried next," The Midwife said, unable to shake a sing-song note from her voice.

"Uh huh."

"You should probably try it on, just to make sure it fits."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Maybe when you go visit your family next? Didn't you say they just took on a new shepherd? What was their name again?"

The Maid crossed her arms. "You know damn well what his name is, you meddling old woman."

“Old! Barely halfway through my years, and she calls me old!” The Midwife didn’t bother to hide her laugh.

She moved to take the reins, only for The Maid to reach up and stop her. “Wait! I have to know. What was your original plan? Before we knew The Lindworm wasn’t so bad?”

“Oh that?” The Midwife shrugged, “I was going to whip the creature until its mouth opened and pour the lye down its throat. The milk was in case any got on us. Good thing Kjell had a flair for the dramatic and talking too much, hmm? Now, if you would excuse me, I wish to be as far away as possible before everyone sobers up in the morning. And you best be gone, too, unless you wish to clean up the mess.”

With a flick of her wrist, The Midwife drove the cart away, leaving The Maid and the rest of the kingdom behind in a cloud of dust.

The Maid found the tenth dress laid out on her bed, along with The Midwife’s second-best shawl.

She wore both at her wedding, looking far more splendid than The Queen ever could.